

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 3rd Sunday of Advent, December 13, 2015

Joy to the World
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
December 13, 2015

Zephaniah 3:14-20 Isaiah 12:2-6 Philippians 4:4-7 Luke 3:7-18

Three years ago on the 3rd Sunday of Advent I used the sermon title of “Unbounded Joy”. Today’s four scripture readings are the same as they were then. “Joy to the World” --- That is the sense of our four scripture readings, expectant joy, unbounded joy, as we approach the celebration of our Savior’s birth.

The canticle, our psalm this morning comes from Isaiah instead of the Psalter, and it admonishes us to be joyful, to trust in the Lord, to give thanks and sing his praises, to sing for joy.

Our Old Testament reading from Zephaniah also calls for rejoicing. God is coming to set things right. It is a day of celebration. We have nothing to fear --- salvation is at hand for everyone. It is a time for celebration --- a time for joy – joy to the world.

But it is Advent and even amid our joy we can’t get away from John the Baptizer. Sure, he rants and raves a bit in our reading from Luke calling us a brood of vipers but he is also bringing a message of joy proclaiming the coming of the Messiah, Jesus the Christ. John is really the star of Advent scripture readings proclaiming the good news of Christ.

The Rev. Agnes Norfleet at Shandon Presbyterian Church in Columbia, SC, said: *“You cannot get to Christmas without going through John the Baptist. You just can’t do it.”* She admonishes us to *“... leave John and his grumpy Advent warnings in the dust.”*

Well, we can’t ignore John but we can anticipate the joy to come to the world with the Advent of our Lord and Savior. We need to look forward to those times of joy on December 25th and when he returns again. John the Baptizer’s message in all four Gospels disrupts the Advent season. He is here every year admonishing us to repent, to abandon our usual ways, and to turn to the ways of God. John cares for our souls. In the words of Rev. Norfleet, *“He doesn’t have much use for institutional religion. He is a reformer. He needs no building. He cares seriously about peoples’ souls. He is a*

religious fanatic who gets in the way of our beautiful Christmas traditions with his locust eating bad breath, his smelly old fur coat, his wild-eyed prophecy, and his message of repentance, of turning away from the ways of the world and turning toward God.”

John is harsh on us but he tells us how to bring joy to the world by looking forward to the coming of the one whose sandals he is not worthy to untie. He admonishes us to share what we have with others, thus bringing joy to them. He admonishes the tax collectors and soldiers not to extort money from others and to be happy with what they have. John is telling us to be ethical in our dealings with others for out of that, out of sharing and helping others, comes joy, joy for the giver and joy for the recipient.

We look forward each year to the Christmas season but not always joyfully. We get caught up in the pressure of “getting ready for Christmas.” Months before Christmas we get inundated with crass commercialization --- buy this --- buy that --- buy something else.

The media exacerbate this with all of the hype and publicity about Black Friday -- - or Thursday --- or even Wednesday. Make out your Christmas gift list, find the perfect gift for everyone, and do it early. Pressure --- pressure --- pressure. It goes on for week after week, month after month, and it isn't joyful.

Take it easy. Pay no attention to the hype. Be joyful. Get out your Christmas decorations and set them up joyfully, not hurriedly. As you do, think about what they mean. If you are like Betsy and me, you likely have acquired those ornaments and decorations over the years, many of which bring back pleasant memories of years gone by. Handle each one joyfully. Think about what each one represents. Let those pleasant memories come back. Be joyful, Joy should be long lasting, not a brief interlude in the pressures of the season.

The joy should come in two ways. First most certainly in the celebration of Christ's birth 12 days from now --- the first Advent --- but also in the expectation of the second Advent --- the second coming of our Lord and savior which we await.

As our reading from Philippians says, *“Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving,*

present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (NIV).

In his Bible paraphrase The Message Eugene Peterson stated our scripture reading this way:

“Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you’re on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them to see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute”

“Don’t fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God’s wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It’s wonderful when Christ displaces worry at the center of life.”

Peterson paraphrases it well --- Christ will come. He will bring joy to the world. That is really the true message of Advent.

A devotional in These Days (January 9, 2015) said, *“We yearn to live in the presence of the God of peace, yet daily life gets in our way.... Still, God invites us to live in peace that passes understanding ... This kind of peace is not dependant on the circumstance of our lives. God is the source of this peace. The path that brings us to this peace involves focusing our own thoughts, with the help of the Holy Spirit and the true, honorable, just, pure and excellent things of life.”*

Lay aside the pressures of daily life and the insignificant things about the Christmas and Advent season. Focus on the true meaning of the season --- not commercialism and shopping for gifts, but upon Christ’s Advent.

“Joy to the World! The Lord is come: Let earth receive her King; Let every heart prepare Him room, and heaven and nature sing.”

Alleluia! Amen.